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Old Ballroom Awaits Return After a Redo

Owner of Wolcott Hotel Plans to Restore Glamour to Its Dining Room

Columns in the ballroom of the Hotel Wolcott

KEITH BEDFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Lana Bortolot

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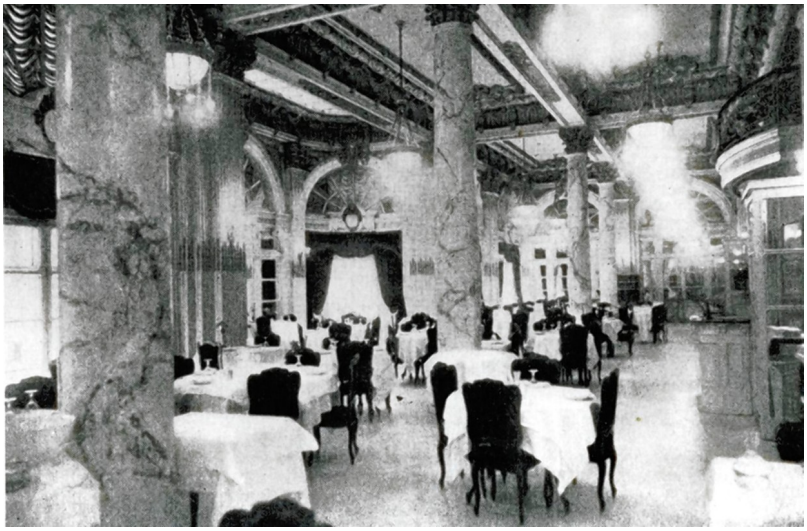
The owner of a landmark hotel in Midtown plans to restore the former glamour to its dining room where famous authors and heiresses once ate, music legends recorded albums and where movie stars and starlets now pose in the fashion of the day.

Edith Wharton, Mark Twain and Doris Duke all stayed in the Hotel Wolcott. Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers and Miles Davis did recordings at the hotel when the dining room, which was also used as a ballroom, was home to Beltone Studios. Today, the building is an active hotel but the party space remains unrestored and used mostly for storage and occasional magazine photo sessions with celebrities such as Jennifer Lawrence and Amanda Seyfried.



The space in use as a dining room in a 1938 photo.
WOLCOTT HOTEL

Designed in 1904 by the same architect who designed Grant's Tomb in upper Manhattan, the 12-story building at 4 W. 31st St. was marketed as a travelers' hotel, but also was "glad of permanent guests" according to a brochure for the Wolcott. It served as the long-term lodgings of people as celebrated as dancer Isadora Duncan and as inconspicuous as Rose O'Neill, creator of the Kewpie doll.

Its distinctive pink-brick facade, limestone frills and copper mansard roof gave it standing among other luxury hotels of its time. Mayor Fiorella La Guardia hosted his 1938 inauguration gala in the ballroom. But, like other buildings in the neighborhood, the Wolcott became a welfare hotel, as did the Martinique at 32nd Street and Broadway—now a Radisson hotel—and the Latham on East 28th Street.

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"In the '70s it fell upon bad times until we acquired it," said Scott Erlich, whose family bought the Wolcott in 1975 for $650,000. "And it's changed as the neighborhood has

changed." As managing partner for 20 years, Mr. Erlich has overseen the transition from a transient hotel to a European-influenced boutique hotel. The exterior received city landmark status in 2011.

A doorway detail

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"We decided to update rather than renovate...to differentiate [it] from other cookie-cutter hotels in the area," Mr. Erlich said. "Now that the upstairs is up to speed, we can focus on the more public area of the property."

The hotel recently completed a five-year renovation of the 200 guest rooms, updated for a modern, but modest, customer. The lobby was redone in 1992, with many of the original details, including a Tiffany window, restored. Mr. Erlich estimates the renovations so far have cost between $2 million and $3 million.

But the 3,500-square-foot ballroom in the back has been empty since a jazz club occupying the space closed in 1996, its tattered glamour now a nostalgic photographic backdrop for video and print shoots.

Mr. Erlich has been exploring costs of renovating the space, which needs to have all its mechanical systems replaced, as well as restoration of the mosaic tile floors, coffered ceiling and 12 Palladian windows. The rich ornamentation is in sore need: It includes Baroque moldings and large columns decorated in the scagliola style, an early fresco-like method of mixing pigment into plaster to create marbleized surfaces.

The state of the ballroom elicited a wistful sigh from Felix Chavez, who worked on the lobby restoration and still helps with its aesthetic upkeep. He said the decorations were a "complicated and historic technique" popular in European churches, but rare to find in New York City. And, he added, still rarer to find in hotels.

The hotel on West 31st Street

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"So many hotels are similar. There's not too many in that very Baroque style," he said. "Unfortunately, commercial buildings are not too interested in doing the old fashioned or classical manner."

Mr. Erlich is weighing the costs of restoring the ballroom. So far, estimates have ranged from $2 million to $5 million. "I can make it a VW or I can make it a Rolls-Royce," he said.

He's also considering how to structure management for the rehabilitated ballroom—as a dedicated event space, leasing it to a long-term tenant or recruiting an investment partner.

"We're not sure how to use it, and there are pros and cons of all three scenarios," he said. He hopes to move forward in first quarter with architectural plans.

In the 1990s, the space was the Five Spot jazz club (no relation to the Five Spot Café, a famed East Village jazz venue), where names such as McCoy Tyner and David Sanborn played.

"It's a shame to keep such a great space empty," said Paul McKenzie, the hotel's general manager. "We'd like to see something happen that our hotel guests and the neighborhood can enjoy, too."

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